

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
12 October 1986

The repercussions of the 'disinformation' leak

By Richard B. Straus
Special to The Inquirer

WASHINGTON — The hunt is on. The explosive revelation that the Reagan administration in August undertook a "disinformation" campaign in order to unnerve Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi has produced a search for culprits, resulted last week in the resignation of State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb in protest, and has caused the bureaucracy to run for cover.

The FBI is expected to conduct an investigation into who leaked the contents of a sensitive National Security Council (NSC) document outlining the disinformation campaign. The search will initially focus on the White House, since distribution of the memorandum was strictly limited. "Few people got to see it," said one White House staff member, who sounded happy he did not. "My boss got his in a sealed envelope."

Disinformation is not commonly found in English dictionaries or used by U.S. officials — for good reason. It comes from the Russian *dezinformatsiya* and is supposed to be associated with Soviet efforts to spread false information for political gain.

Kalb's resignation was tied to this point. But the principle behind his action is being overshadowed by the way he did it, with a final news conference and subsequent television appearances. One key State Department official went so far as to say that Kalb was "not a player, and hadn't been for some time."

White House officials must now certainly regret that the NSC ever wrote down the word *disinformation*. As one U.S. intelligence expert says, "Professionals don't use the word. There are euphemisms." But the word did appear in a memorandum signed by a professional — National Security Adviser John M. Poindexter. "It was used carelessly," one White House aide admitted.

Poindexter, who shoulders most of the responsibility for the flap, is, as usual, saying nothing to the news media. Other administration officials

are, however, not so reticent. "It is amateur hour at the NSC," one State Department official said. "Those folks over there think the world's a stage to act out their childhood fantasies." This official predicts there will be "a sacrificial lamb" produced at the NSC, just as previous leaks resulted in dismissals at the State Department (Spenser C. Warren) and the Defense Department (Michael E. Pillsbury).

The leading candidate at the moment appears to be Howard R. Teischer, director of politico-military affairs at the NSC. Teischer, unlike other unnamed officials, admitted to speaking to the press about the anti-Gadhafi campaign in August. Specifically, he "backgrounded" a Wall Street Journal reporter.

It was the Wall Street Journal that first printed the story that the

United States and Libya were on a "collision course." But in so doing, the Journal became an unwitting participant in administration plans to unsettle Gadhafi, not crash into him.

While Teischer and his colleagues did not try to disabuse the Journal of its dubious scoop, they contend it was the reporters, not they, who hyped the story. In fact, administration officials say that much of the Journal's initial information came from Egyptian and Libyan exile sources in Cairo.

Teischer, in particular, seems to have gotten a bum rap. He neither sought out the Wall Street Journal nor subsequently spoke to the Washington Post, which broke the disinformation story.

A low-key professional, he is, at 34, already a 10-year veteran of National Security posts. A protégé of former National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane, he frequently participated in diplomatic shuttles to the Middle East, including one in October 1983 when he was in the Marine barracks outside Beirut just hours before the terrorist attack that killed 241 U.S. servicemen. Not surprisingly, Teischer sees himself unfairly

caught up in bureaucratic and media "in-fighting."

Teischer and other hard-liners at the NSC also argue that they had little to gain by exposing administration plans. Instead, they point the finger at Pentagon, State Department and Central Intelligence Agency officials who, they say, have long opposed their get-tough-with-Libya approach.

It is clear that officials at these agencies harbor grave doubts about the wisdom of the administration's Libya policy. The Pentagon has repeatedly resisted efforts to engage Libya militarily. Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger time and again has warned of the risks of undermining moderate Arab regimes by forcing them to choose between the United States and a fellow Arab — even an unpopular radical like Gadhafi.

Concerns raised by the Joint Chiefs of Staff harken back to Vietnam, as they continue to worry about a loss of popular support for the military resulting from controversial military actions. The Chiefs are also caught up in a web of interservice rivalries, as various senior officers resist efforts to deploy and engage unconventional anti-terrorist forces, units such as the Delta Force.

Across the river at Foggy Bottom, State Department officials have their own reasons for dissent. Some officials there, though definitely not including Secretary of State George P. Shultz, question the accuracy of reports confirming Libyan involvement in terrorist outrages directed at U.S. citizens. In addition, some State Department Middle East experts dissent from the prevailing White House view that internal opposition in Libya poses a threat to the Gadhafi regime.

Analysts at the Central Intelligence Agency are known to share that view. They report that while dissatisfaction over Libya's economic decline may be rising, it will never coalesce into a popular uprising. Moreover, given Gadhafi's careful diffusion of power among various security and military units, a coup d'etat is equally unlikely.

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But perhaps most troubling to CIA officials is that they have been given the task of molding and promoting the ineffectual Libyan opposition. As one well-informed U.S. official puts it, "the agency is stuck with those bozos, never knowing what lunatic idea they may talk about next. But, whatever it might be, it is bound to show up in the press, and the agency will have to take the heat for it."

With such a wide array of potential suspects — including who leaked the memo as well as who briefed the Journal — the FBI team recently formed to investigate administration leaks has its work cut out.

Moreover, the unit will operate under the additional handicap of being composed of FBI veterans lacking knowledge in international affairs. "Gumshoe is too kind a term for them," one U.S. intelligence expert says. "If you want to know how badly the FBI handles itself in the international arena, ask anyone from State or Defense who had to work with them on a terrorist investigation." So while the hunt may be on, those included among the hunted should probably rest easy.

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